

Structural models of emotional freedom

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Abstract

The study synthesizes theoretical perspectives on the structural models of emotional freedom and emphasizes that the development of this skill significantly impacts people's quality of life. To acquire emotional freedom, the presented models draw on various techniques and tools to facilitate its development. Emotional awareness (LEAS Scale) is presented as a foundation, with a path from bodily sensations to the identification of complex emotions in oneself and others. Emotional differentiation and regulation are interdependent: a fine labeling of emotions expands the repertoire of regulation strategies, and effective interventions combine the development of affective vocabulary with practical techniques (mindfulness, reframing, body techniques). The theoretical models analyzed — neuropsychological, expressive motivational relational and therapeutic (ACT, CFT) — offer complementary perspectives that, integrated, support the formation of authentic emotional freedom. The study emphasizes the crucial role of the family and school environment in the formation of self-regulation and resilience and recommends programs that include assessment (LEAS), emotional differentiation training, regulation training, and training for parents and teachers. Longitudinal studies and cultural adaptations are proposed to validate and streamline interventions in local contexts. In essence, emotional freedom is not an innate characteristic but a complex process that unfolds gradually and is shaped by social contexts and experiences.

Keywords: attachment, emotional awareness, psychological flexibility, mindfulness, emotional regulation.

Introduction

The relevance of studying the scientific significance of emotional freedom stems from the need to understand how self-regulation, awareness, and appropriate emotional expression contribute to an individual's psychological balance and the efficiency of social and professional interactions amid the rapid transformations of contemporary society.

The importance of studying the structural models of emotional freedom lies in the essential role that the management and conscious expression of emotions play in maintaining psychological balance, personal development, and the quality of interpersonal relationships. In the context of accelerated social change, professional pressures, and the increasing complexity of human interactions, the individual's ability to understand, regulate, and authentically and responsibly express their emotions becomes a fundamental psychological competence.

From a scientific perspective, the structural analysis of emotional freedom allows the identification of its constitutive components — cognitive, affective, and behavioral — as well as the mechanisms through which they interact in emotional self-regulation processes.

Thus, the study contributes to clarifying the concept of emotional freedom and to delimiting it from related concepts, such as emotional intelligence, psychological resilience, or personal autonomy.

At the same time, research into structural models of emotional freedom has significant applied relevance for fields such as educational psychology, university pedagogy, psychological counseling, and organizational management. In the educational environment, in particular, fostering emotional freedom among students and teachers can help create a healthy academic climate, improve communication, and increase the efficiency of learning processes.

Therefore, investigating this concept not only expands the theoretical framework of the psychology of emotions but also provides methodological benchmarks for developing training and intervention programs aimed at cultivating emotional balance and personal autonomy.

Materials and methods

Materials

The type of study is a theoretical review and conceptual integration of the specialized literature, based on the cited fundamental works and the materials used include the concepts and scales mentioned in the text — especially the Levels of Awareness Scale (LEAS) — as well as theoretical scales and questionnaires for mindfulness, emotional regulation and measures of psychological flexibility; also, excerpts from articles, synthetic tables (e.g. the table with the five LEAS levels) and conceptual figures (e.g. the sensitivity vs. emotional regulation model) were used. “The Levels of Awareness Scale (LEAS), based on Piaget’s studies, subsequently improved as it was applied to people.” The analysis and organisation of the bibliography were carried out using a reference manager and Word, and the thematic analysis was carried out manually. “This study aims to analyse, systematise, and integrate theoretical perspectives on structural models of emotional freedom.” All sources are cited, no sensitive personal data or unpublished empirical data were used, and limitations include the theoretical nature of the approach and the absence of original empirical data.

Methods

The methodological design of the study is a systemic theoretical analysis and a narrative review of the literature, aiming to integrate theoretical perspectives on the structure of emotional freedom; the selection of sources targeted fundamental works and reviews relevant to the key concepts (emotional awareness, regulation, mindfulness, acceptance, relational, ACT), including the works cited in the -source document and related publications of the mentioned authors. The analysis procedure consisted of identifying and extracting the central ideas from each theoretical model, followed by thematic coding of the concepts (e.g. emotional differentiation, experiential avoidance, functions of regulation), comparing and synthesizing the models to highlight commonalities and differences (interdependence, goals and functions of regulation, relational implications), and, finally, interpretive generalization to build an integrative conceptual framework. The quality of the approach is based on theoretical rigor, transparency in citation, and systematic organization of the materials, but important limitations include the exclusively theoretical nature of the review, the absence of original empirical data, and the potential influence of literature selection bias on the conclusions.

Table 1. Scientific models reflecting the values of emotional freedom

No. of documents.	Theoretical model	author	Year
1.	The discrete emotions model	Ekman	1992
2.	The emotional acceptance model	Hayes et al.	1996
3.	The meta-emotions model	Gottman and Hooven	1996
4.	The somatic emotional intelligence model	Damasio	1996
5.	The emotional intelligence model	Mayer and Salovey	1997
6.	The emotional autonomy model	So does Ryan	2000
7.	Personal Values Model (ACT)	Bond and Hayes	2002
8.	The relational model	Johnson	2004
9.	The emotional self-regulation model	Kool	2009
10.	Cognitive distancing/mindfulness model	Segal, Williams and Teasdale	2013
11.	Emotional awareness model	Lane and Schwartz	2021

As society evolves, education and human development are reformed to keep pace with these changes and improve everyday life. In this context, studies on emotional education have developed their perspectives and demonstrated that emotions are not simple, spontaneous reactions but complex processes shaped by development, context, and social interactions.

The discrete emotion model (Ekman, 1992) supports the universality of emotional expressions. The emotional acceptance model (Hayes et al. 1996, 1156) highlights the role of experiential avoidance, defined as the situation in which the person "is unwilling to remain in contact with particular private experiences".

The meta-emotion model (Gottman and Hooven, 1996) shows that parenting styles shape the child's emotional development, and the somatic model (Damasio, 1996) explains the role of bodily markings in decision-making.

The emotional intelligence model (Mayer and Salovey, in Ursu, 2025) emphasizes perception, facilitation, understanding, and regulation; the emotional autonomy model (Deci and Ryan, 2000) shows that emotional freedom derives from satisfying the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

The Personal Values Model (ACT) explains how language can generate psychological rigidity through cognitive fusion, and psychological flexibility allows people to stay connected to the present and act in accordance with their values, even in the presence of difficult emotions.

The relational model (Johnson, 2004) emphasizes the role of emotions in couple dynamics, showing that primary emotions are often masked by defensive reactions.

Koole's (2009) model of emotional self-regulation explains how attention, cognition, and the body become targets of regulation, and its functions—hedonic, goal-oriented, and personality-oriented—maintain psychological balance. Thompson completes

the perspective, stating that emotional regulation is the ability to "notice what we are feeling and adjust emotions to achieve goals."

The cognitive distancing and mindfulness model -(Segal et al., 2013) shows how depression can be prevented by changing the relationship with thoughts so that they are perceived as transient mental events. Shapiro and colleagues describe the mechanism of IAA (intention, attention, attitude), which facilitates "a disidentify from the contents of consciousness".

The Emotional Awareness Model, where Lane and Schwartz (2021) show that emotions are "automatic reactions of the mind and body to everyday contexts", and the development of awareness depends on maturation, experience and context. The LEAS scale describes five progressive levels, from bodily sensations to the ability to identify complex emotions in oneself and others. Barrett and Gross (2021) introduce the concepts of emotional differentiation and emotional regulation, emphasizing that people who recognize varied emotions have multiple coping strategies. They show that "emotional differentiation is an important skill" that directly influences how emotions are managed.

Emotional awareness model

The theory of the authors Lane and Schwartz (2021, pp. 3-5) argues that emotions are automatic reactions of the mind and body to everyday contexts; thus, the development of emotional awareness is a human ability that is constantly evolving.

Lane and Schwartz (2021, p.15) identify five levels, which operate through an interdependent relationship, describing a path from very primitive perceptions to complex understanding of one's own and others' emotions. At the first level, the person notices only bodily sensations and cannot describe or link them to an emotion. At the second level, action tendencies appear – impulses such as flight, approach, or disorganized reactions, without a clear distinction between good and bad. The third level involves recognizing simple emotions, but in a limited and conventional manner. At the fourth level, the person can simultaneously identify multiple emotions, even contradictory ones. The highest level, the fifth, involves the ability to understand both one's own emotions and those of others, maintaining a balanced and empathetic perspective.

The emotional self-regulation model

Koole (2009, p. 8) defines emotional regulation in relation to sensitivity, thus, sensitivity refers to how quickly the emotion appears, and regulation determines how quickly it disappears. Because there are numerous strategies for regulating emotions, the author distinguishes them by their targets and functions. The "target" criterion highlights three essential directions of emotional regulation: attention, cognition, and body. Attention involves deliberate orientation to not feed negative stimuli and to stay in the present through practices such as mindfulness; cognition refers to how we interpret situations and the memories they activate; and the body needs specific strategies – controlled breathing, muscle relaxation – to prevent the physiological effects of intense emotions. In addition, Koole describes three functions of emotional regulation: the hedonic one, oriented towards reducing negative emotions and increasing positive ones; the goal-oriented one, which involves distracting attention to prevent the amplification of emotions; and the personality-oriented one, aimed at maintaining psychological balance. An illustrative example is an

exam situation: shifting attention away from worry, cognitive reinterpretation ("I am ready"), and bodily relaxation together help reduce anxiety and restore emotional control.

Cognitive distancing/mindfulness model

Segal, Williams and Teasdale (2013, 11–20) have become aware of the importance of preventing depression, its recurrent nature, the limits of medication and the reactivation of negative thought patterns. In this sense, through the studies carried out, they have developed a therapy based on emotional distancing and mindfulness practice. Emotional distancing means the ability to see thoughts as passing mental events rather than facts or personal identities. Instead of "I am a failure", the person comes to notice: "The thought that I am a failure has arisen". This change reduces the power of negative thoughts and prevents the automatic reactivation of depressive episodes. Regarding the role of mindfulness, the technique facilitates the maintenance of a state of presence of people, such as observing thoughts and emotions, without identifying with them. The authors support this model in therapy for the cure of depression, because depression is an illness that reactivates, and the strategies they suggest not only treat the symptoms, but also change the relationship with the mind, reducing long-term vulnerability.

The emotional acceptance model

The authors Hayes, SC, Wilson, KG, Gifford, EV, Follette, VM, and Strosahl, K. (1996, pp. 1156) consider that experiential avoidance "is the phenomenon that occurs when a person is unwilling to remain in contact with particular private experiences. and takes steps to alter the form or frequency of these events and the contexts that occasion them," that can represent forms of psychological disorders.

The article shows that there are several reasons that lead to the emergence of experiential avoidance, such as: human language causes negative labels to intensify emotional discomfort; socially learned control rules are misapplied to one's own experiences; and culture promotes the idea that unpleasant emotions should be avoided, and in the short term, avoidance seems to work, which reinforces it. Emotional avoidance becomes problematic when this strategy becomes rigid, because it begins to limit the person's life, amplifying the very emotions they are trying to avoid — for example, suppressing thoughts often leads to their reappearance with greater intensity.

Hayes, et al. (1996, 1160–1161) consider that the practice of emotional avoidance is useful in several clinical categories such as: substance abuse (drugs contribute to the avoidance of unwanted emotions); obsessive-compulsive disorder (the use of appropriate strategies to avoid negative experiences); panic and agoraphobia (fear of fear) and borderline personality disorder (the inability to regulate intense emotions causes behaviors such as self-mutilation, etc.). Therefore, the technique of emotional avoidance should be practiced moderately because it can amplify discomfort or maintain the disorder if used excessively.

The relational model

Johnson, (2004, p.2) believes that emotions are the foundation of human relationships and the main driver of the connection between partners and they are not simple individual reactions, but relational processes that arise, are amplified, or calmed down depending on the responses of the other. For couples in tense relationships, primary emotions (such as fear

of abandonment or desire for closeness) are masked by defensive secondary reactions (anger, criticism, withdrawal), which lead to negative interaction cycles.

In this sense, EFT therapy (Johnson 2004, 8-9) is grounded in attachment theory and considers emotions as messages that guide behaviour, stimulate closeness between partners, and shape how the two interact. Its goal is to reorganize emotional responses and create new cycles of interaction, which strengthen the bond between partners.

The author shows that when partners can recognize and express emotions in a safe setting, and the other shows openness and empathy, a visible improvement in the relationship occurs, new emotional patterns are created, a reconnection occurs, and a more secure attachment is formed.

Therefore, emotions become questions waiting to be answered, with the power to shape emotional experience and relationship dynamics, and to heal wounds.

Personal Values Model (ACT)

The study by Bond and Hayes (2002, 6-13) explores how Relational Frame Theory (RFT) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) can extend behavioural analysis in organisations, providing a coherent approach to understanding and modifying employee behaviours.

On the one hand, one of the problems identified is language, which can lead to psychological inflexibility through human interaction processes. When people come to treat thoughts as absolute truths, avoid unpleasant emotions and become confused with their own interpretations, a phenomenon called *cognitive fusion occurs* that causes rigidity in behavior, favors experiential avoidance, and gradually affects both performance and psychological health.

On the other hand, psychological flexibility is the ability to stay connected to the present moment, to observe thoughts and emotions without avoiding or rejecting them, and to act in accordance with your values, even when internal difficulties arise. It is, in essence, the ability to move freely between experiences and choose behaviors that bring you closer to the life you want to live.

The emotional intelligence model

Ursu (2025, 14) presents the model of emotional intelligence proposed by Mayer and Salovey in 1997, consisting of four fundamental directions: perception, facilitation, understanding and regulation. Goleman believes that this model of emotional intelligence can be part of the theoretical framework for understanding and developing emotional competencies in contemporary education. Pedagogical specialists believe that emotional intelligence can be presented through two main directions, such as personality trait and mental aptitude. In the current context of Romanian society, this model is viewed from various perspectives – popular, cultural and scientific – considering the ideal teacher who masters the “emotional culture” through the ability to understand students’ emotions and manage them in teaching.

The meta-emotions model

Gottman and Hooven (1996, pp. 243–268) state that parents have an important role in the emotional education of children, through the behavioral model they offer: understanding,

interpreting and managing their own emotions, as well as those of their children, have a direct impact on emotional development and self-regulation capacity. According to the authors, the concept of "meta-emotion" refers to the attitudes that parents have towards their own emotions, as reflected in the four parenting styles they adopt. In this context, we list these styles: emotional coaching (guiding the child in recognizing and expressing emotions); emotional rejection (rejecting emotions that take the child out of their comfort zone); minimization (reducing or ignoring the intensity of emotions) and the laissez-faire style (accepting emotions without providing guidance in managing them). The influence of these styles is very important because they create the affective environment in which the child grows, subsequently influencing social adaptation, emotional skills, and resilience.

The somatic emotional intelligence model

The representative of this model, Damasio (1996, 1413-1420) argues that the decision-making process is determined by "emotional markers". The dynamics of emotions, body, and cognition show that the decision is the result of this interaction. In this sense, emotions give physiological signals that reactivate attention, behavior and evaluation of options previously considered beneficial. Therefore, the neuropsychological model explains how emotions influence reasoning and decision-making, and these processes can operate both consciously and unconsciously, and their role is essential in conditions of uncertainty or complexity.

The discrete emotions model

Ekman, (1992, pp.169–200) associates certain facial expressions with emotions: joy, sadness, anger, fear, disgust and surprise. In his opinion, these facilitate adaptation in borderline situations and regulate social interactions. The author calls them "discrete" because they can be delimited from the main emotions due to different patterns of physiology, expressiveness and behaviors.

The emotional autonomy model

Deci and Ryan (2000, 227–268) believe that a person achieves emotional freedom when they have capacities for autonomy, competence, and relationality. In other words, a person has achieved emotional freedom when they act naturally in line with their emotions, guided by their values, have control over situations, and can form authentic connections or receive emotional support without being influenced by external pressure.

Table 2. Definitions that promote the idea of emotional freedom

Structural model	Definition	Structure/components
The discrete emotions model	Basic emotions are universal and have specific facial expressions, useful for adaptation and communication.	6 emotions: joy, sadness, anger, fear, disgust, surprise.
The emotional acceptance model	Experiential avoidance occurs when the person is "unwilling to stay in touch with certain internal	Acceptance vs avoidance; the role of language, social rules, and culture; and the balance between emotional

	experiences" and tries to modify them.	tolerance and psychological flexibility.
emotion model-	Meta -emotions = parents' attitudes towards their own and children's emotions, influencing emotional development.	4 styles: emotional coaching, rejection, minimization, laissez -faire.
The somatic emotional intelligence model	Decisions are guided by "emotional cues" – physiological signals that guide attention and the evaluation of options.	Dynamic emotion → body → cognition; somatic markers → adaptive decision.
Emotional intelligence (skill) model	EI = perception, facilitation, understanding and regulation of emotions; can be a mental trait or aptitude.	4 branches: perception → facilitation → understanding → regulation.
Emotional autonomy model (SDT)	Emotional freedom occurs when the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied.	3 fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, relatedness.
Personal Values Model (ACT)	Psychological flexibility = the ability to stay connected to the present and act in accordance with values, even in the presence of difficult emotions.	ACT processes: cognitive defusion, acceptance, contact with the present, values, and committed action.
The Relational Model (EFT)	Emotions are relational processes that amplify or calm down depending on the other's response; the basis of connection and attachment.	Primary vs. secondary emotions; negative cycles; 3 emotional systems: threat, guidance, reassurance.
The emotional self-regulation model	Emotional regulation is the ability to observe and adjust emotions to achieve goals and maintain psychological balance.	3 targets: attention, cognition, body; 3 functions: hedonic, goal-oriented, personality-oriented.
Cognitive distancing/mindfulness model	Emotional detachment means seeing thoughts as fleeting mental events, and mindfulness allows for observing them without identification.	IAA components: intention, attention, attitude; the process of <i>reperceiving</i> – changing the relationship with one's own experiences.

Emotional awareness model	Emotions are "automatic reactions of the mind and body to everyday contexts," and awareness of them is a continuously developing skill.	5 levels: (I) bodily sensations; (II) action tendencies; (III) simple emotions; (IV) mixture of emotions; (V) complex mixtures in self and others.
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The analysis of the table shows the evolution of theories of emotion over the last three decades, from biological and universal models, such as Ekman's discrete emotions, to complex perspectives on emotional awareness. The first models (1992–1997) define emotions as either innate physiological reactions or cognitive resources involved in decision-making and emotional intelligence. Later, theories from the 2000s shift the focus to the role of emotions in satisfying psychological needs, in relationships and in guiding behavior according to values. Models from 2009–2013 introduce self-regulation and mindfulness as active processes through which the individual can influence the way he experiences and manages emotions. Finally, the emotional awareness model (2021) integrates the body, cognition, and relationships within a developmental vision, in which emotions are understood at varying levels of complexity. Viewed as a whole, the table shows the shift from a strictly biological vision to an integrative one, in which emotions are dynamic processes, influenced by context, relationships, values, and the capacity for self-reflection.

Overall, the models presented show an evolution in the way psychology understands emotions: from universal biological reactions, to processes influenced by relationships, values, attention, and awareness. This progression highlights the shift from a static to a dynamic view, in which emotions become resources for personal, relational, and psychological development.

Results and discussion

The theoretical models analyzed complement each other: emotional awareness supports the differentiation of emotions, which broadens the options for emotional regulation, and practices such as mindfulness and cognitive distancing reduce identification with thoughts and increase psychological flexibility. This integrative framework underpins educational and therapeutic programs that combine awareness assessment, attention training, ACT techniques, and relational interventions to improve adaptation, decision-making, and relationship quality. However, the approach has limitations, being predominantly theoretical and lacking new empirical data, which requires caution in generalizations. Future directions aim to conduct empirical studies and longitudinal research to test the effectiveness of integrated programs and their long-term impact.

Neuropsychological and universal expressivity models offer complementary explanations for the internal mechanisms and external manifestations of emotions, while motivational and relational frameworks emphasize the role of the social environment and psychological needs in the development of emotional freedom.

The synergy between the models suggests that an integrated approach—which treats emotions as developable processes, systematically measures them, and supports them through multimodal interventions in the family and school—is the most promising path to

increasing emotional competence and emotional freedom. However, practical implementation must be accompanied by rigorous research, cultural adaptation, and ongoing training of educational actors.

Conclusions

The scientific analysis of structural models of emotional freedom highlights the complexity of the concept, emphasizing the importance of integrating cognitive, affective, and behavioral components in developing the individual's capacity for self-regulation, authentic expression of emotions, and effective adaptation to the demands of the social environment.

The study synthesizes complementary models that explain how emotional awareness, differentiation, and regulation, along with mindfulness practices and acceptance strategies, contribute to psychological flexibility and to improved quality of life and relationships. Integrating these perspectives provides a useful framework for developing educational and therapeutic interventions aimed at increasing people's ability to recognize, tolerate, and use emotions adaptively. For validation, empirical studies are needed to test the effectiveness of the proposed integrated programs.

Emotions must be viewed as complex, developable processes, not as isolated reactions; they are shaped by maturation, experience, and social context, and emotional education thus becomes an essential component of long-term human formation.

Emotional awareness is the foundation of educational interventions: the LEAS scale provides a framework for assessment and progression, from bodily sensations to the identification of complex emotions in oneself and others, and programs must follow this developmental path to increase emotional competence.

Emotional differentiation and emotional regulation are interdependent processes: the ability to name and distinguish multiple emotions expands the repertoire of regulation strategies, and effective interventions combine the development of emotional vocabulary with practical regulation techniques (attention, reframing, body techniques).

The theoretical models presented are complementary and provide different bases for practice: some explain neurophysiological mechanisms, others provide frameworks for assessment, family intervention or skills development; their integration allows for multimodal interventions, adapted to age and educational context.

The social and family environment plays a decisive role in the formation of emotional competences: parenting styles and the affective climate shape the child's self-regulation, social adaptation and resilience, so school programs should include training components for parents and teachers in "emotional culture".

An integrated curricular approach is recommended — assessment through LEAS, training in emotional differentiation, regulation techniques such as mindfulness, breathing, and reframing, along with family involvement — supported by longitudinal studies to evaluate the effectiveness of these programs and analyze the relationship between somatic markers, awareness, and decision-making.

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